PRIVATE AND PROFESSIONAL LIVES, PEDAGOGICAL WORK AND SITUATED LEARNING: THE MULTILITERACIES OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

R. E. HARREVELD & PATRICK ALAN DANAHER

Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development Centre, Division of Teaching and Learning Services, Central Queensland University, Australia
b.harreveld@cqu.edu.au, p.danaher@cqu.edu.au

Abstract

This paper responds to, and synthesises selected aspects of, the preceding articles in this special theme issue of the *Malaysian Journal of Distance Education* focusing on multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996) and their possible implications for new understandings of distance education in contemporary educational institutions and settings. We construct the response in terms of our identification of three crucial ideas with which we contend that designers, producers and consumers of distance education must connect: private and professional lives; pedagogical work; and situated learning.

Based on our response to the preceding articles, centred on these three ideas, we essay a synthesis of selected aspects of the articles that enable us to address two key questions: "How are multiliteracies relevant to contemporary debates about teaching and learning?"; and "What are the implications of multiliteracies for new understandings of distance education in the Asia Pacific region in the early 21st century?". We engage with those questions in terms of two dimensions: cultural and linguistic diversities; and new communication technologies. We argue that, just as the concept of multiliteracies is augmented and enriched by the theorising underpinning the articles in this issue, so too understandings of distance education are expanded and deepened by the judicious application of a multiliteracies framework, particularly one predicated on diversities and technologies in specific geopolitical contexts and on harnessing the productive potential of such diversities and technologies.

INTRODUCTION

In a previous article in this journal (Danaher, Harreveld & Li, 2000), a colleague and we likened the field of distance teacher education to "this dynamic and sometimes turbulent 'sea'" (p. 33), and we advocated the deployment of navigational tools that would enable 'producers' and 'consumers' alike to voyage across this 'sea' in ways that were beneficial and productive, rather than detrimental and destructive. We phrased our argument in terms of three fundamental influences on distance teacher education in Australia and China, the two countries under review in the article: globalisation, dedifferentiation and marketisation.

In this paper, we extend the range of our discussion to distance education and to the Asia Pacific region more broadly. We also change the lens underpinning our analysis: in place of the three influences identified above, we use the concept of multiliteracies with which every article in this special theme issue has engaged. Yet the emphasis on navigation as a means of facilitating a successful journey remains – and that is appropriate, if we take the navigation and the journey as signifying respectively the teaching and learning elements of distance education with which all readers of this journal are concerned in one way or another. In the case of this article and the issue that it concludes, the journey is intended to be new understandings of distance education based on a multiliteracies framework.

So where are we in the particular journey of this special theme issue at this point? We have read seven articles and seen how each of them has taken up the concept of multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996) and 'tweaked' and 'twisted' (and in some cases potentially reshaped) that concept as a means of exploring and explaining the specific educational institutions and settings with which they are respectively concerned. At the same time, we have seen how the authors of the seven articles have communicated their various understandings of distance education in the Asia Pacific region in the early 21st century. There are two 'common denominators' in these sets of ideas: cultural and linguistic diversities; and new communication technologies. Such diversities and technologies constitute the basis of multiliteracies as elaborated in the articles here; they also make up key aspects of distance education, by representing respectively the multiple situations of distance education learners and the complex delivery models designed to engage those learners.

Our purpose in this paper is to respond to, and to comment on, some of the ideas encountered in the preceding articles – not with a view to privileging our voices *vis-à-vis* those of the articles' authors, but rather in the spirit of ongoing collaboration and dialogue. At the same time, we aspire to bring together some of the common themes underpinning the articles, as one among several possible new ways of understanding distance education and taking the discussion of its current relevance and its future meaning further.

We have elected to prosecute this two-sided task by means of an elaboration of three crucial ideas that we assert should exercise the minds – and the hearts – of participants and stakeholders in contemporary distance education provision. While several such ideas could have been explored, we have selected the following:

- Private and professional lives
- Pedagogical work
- Situated learning.

The logic of the sequence of presenting these ideas is that distance education students', teachers' and support staff members' private and professional lives (see also Fleming & Cribb, 2004; Pandian, 2004; Scown, 2004; Walker-Gibbs, 2004; Windeknecht, 2004) provide a standpoint for the enactment of the pedagogical work of distance education, while such work is directed at promoting effective learning situated in multiple cultural contexts. Moreover, as we elaborate in the conclusion to this paper, each of these ideas is integrally associated with multiliteracies and has significant implications for new understandings of distance education.

On the basis of our account of the three ideas, informed by the work of the authors in this special theme issue, we also present in the conclusion necessarily tentative but focused answers to two key questions implicit in the preceding articles and explicit in this one:

- "How are multiliteracies relevant to contemporary debates about teaching and learning?"
- "What are the implications of multiliteracies for new understandings of distance education in the Asia Pacific region in the early 21st century?"

We assert that the responses to these questions are integrally connected with actions and initiatives likely to promote the productive potential of multiliteracies and distance education – that is, with using the ideas analysed here as a means of undertaking a journey to a new and enriching terrain in which diversities and technologies are educative and empowering in the broadest senses of those words.

MULTILITERACIES AND PRIVATE AND PROFESSIONAL LIVES

Pandian's (2004) research is framed by notions of multiliteracies, technologies and work with school teachers enrolled in distance learning programs in Malaysia and it shows that language is used as a cultural broker within the personally focused social groups of families and workplaces (in this instance, schools). He argues that:

> Educational institutions have to respond to the radical changes that are currently underway in our lifeworlds and at the same time tread a careful path that will not only focus on the workplace but also have the capacity for other domains of our lifeworlds like the spiritual, family and cultural. (Pandian, 2004, p. 7)

Significantly, a consideration of these culturally framed domains of learners' personal (spiritual, family) and professional (workplace) lives permeates his research findings. Similarly, McNaught's (2004, p. 119) analysis of Australian universities from an Asian location (Hong Kong) contends that "Western universities have much to learn from the Chinese academy in terms of maintaining a connectedness or balance between "institution and political–social–natural context" (Hayhoe, 2001, p. 347)" as Confucianism and other forms of knowledge are valued in this higher education workplace context.

Universities and colleges are workplaces not only for teachers and students but also for people working in "[t]he international office, the language centre, the information technology support centre, the library, the educational quality unit and other relevant units [who] need to work together with academic departments in the design of transnational education programs" (McNaught, 2004, 124). From an Australian perspective, Mawer (1999) has written extensively on new literacies for new times as people respond to a continuous maelstrom of workplace change that has meant that:

To remain viable, workplaces have had to deal with conflicting and interrelated pressures at a number of levels: economic, industrial and technological. The main changes include:

- stronger competition from local and overseas markets;
- reductions in numbers of employees;
- an increasing focus on quality standards;
- the introduction of new technologies;
- restructuring of industrial awards, and negotiations of enterprise–based agreements;
- more participatory management structures; and
- a greater focus on skills development. (Mawer, 1999, pp. 3-4)

As worker-educators in this project, we too are learners of 'new literacies' for 'new times'. In concert with our students and other colleagues working in multidisciplinary teams, we are harnessing multiple and different lifeworlds to make sense of what Fleming and Cribb (2004, p. 28) identify as "new technologies and new languages for

new workplaces".

Whether by happenstance or design, people are brokering changes within their private, personal lives and their professional identities (Harreveld, 2002). The work of professional educators is repositioned as postcompulsory educational institutions such as universities and colleges use an increasingly diverse range of information communication technologies to underpin their delivery platforms. Spatially and temporally, the professional identities of such knowledge workers have to readjust to the 'flexible delivery' modes of institutions that appropriate the acknowledged domains of open and distance learning delivery modes for their economic survival in an increasingly competitive educational marketplace. Cultivating a resilience to withstand and/or appropriate such professional pressures and the resourcefulness to devise alternative learning environments predicated upon learners' ways of knowing constitute a cultural studies for educators (whether they self-identify as teachers, facilitators, tutors, designers, librarians and so on).

The research and pedagogical work reported in this issue of a journal about 'distance education' embodies a conscious commitment to keeping the dimensions of private and professional lives in balance. The authors avert, and we concur, that this is not only an individual and familial choice, but also an institutional and societal mandate for civic responsiveness and responsibility as locally operating global citizens. This mandate is considerably enlarged and fortified by the application of a multiliteracies framework; as we elaborate in the conclusion, this mandate also has important implications for how we understand distance education in the 'new times' in which we and it operate.

THE MULTILITERACIES OF PEDAGOGICAL WORK

We live in changing times, with the rate of social, economic and technological change increasing exponentially. Implicit in this statement is the concept of 'multiliteracies' which we believe to be a constructive concept to describe the complex connections of meaning that are generated through varying combinations of spoken, visual and written language and multimodal communication systems. The ways in which these multiliteracies are mobilised in pedagogical work suggest that the designation of such work as 'distance education' requires ongoing analysis.

'Literacies' is a term that is being used to encompass the multiple combinations of language, literacy and, in some instances, numeracy which people use in the worlds of the home and family, workplaces and schools. In the rapidly changing communication landscapes of digital technologies (together with older analogue technologies), the coining of the term 'multiliteracies' facilitates a closer examination of the literacy resources necessary for university and college learning of the early 21st century. These multi(ple) literacies are embodied in reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing and using mathematical processes and technologies, as well as in appropriate sociocultural behaviours and conventions that constitute resources that we use in the pedagogical work of teaching and learning.

There are multiple combinations of meaningmaking techniques that encompass the print-on-paper '3 Rs' (reading, writing and arithmetic), plus those composed and comprehended through cyberspace, and in multimodal texts that comprise visual

representations, sound and/or print. In their enactments, they accentuate complex iterations among the cultural, social and diverse textual features of human interactions. It is these interactions that fortify the claim of multiliteracies to present a fundamentally different 'take' on literacies; a cogent encapsulation of that 'take' is that it provides a contemporary rendition of Friere's (1973) enduringly relevant point that human actors must learn to read the words *and* the worlds of these complex texts.

As we indicated above, we have chosen the notion of multiliteracies as a conceptual navigational tool to frame and guide our interrogation of distance education. Research reported in this special theme issue illustrates the multiplicity of pedagogical work that educators apply to the design and delivery of their courses. They confirm our contention that there is no one way to 'do' distance education, and more importantly there is no one 'distance education' but rather a hybrid landscape undergoing continual transformation (Cookson, 2002).

There is a symmetry to this pedagogical work that is predicated upon an ever evolving triumvirate of: knowledge and understanding of students as learners; the processes and content with which learners must engage; and the technical capabilities of, and support structures necessary for, a range of technologies. There is a fourth pedagogical consideration that hitherto used to be considered in the realm of the beancounting bureaucrats yet is increasingly a consideration that teachers deliberately engage with because of their connectedness with their students-as-learners: their students' capacities to pay.

In Australia, the cost of postcompulsory education is met only partially from taxpayer funded government coffers. A feature of the latest generation of 'flexible' (formerly distance) learning initiatives which foreground the Internet as the delivery platform of institutional or systemic choice actually transfers a substantial portion of the delivery cost from the institution to the individual. For example, in compliance with relevant copyright clearances, multimedia designers can hyperlink learners to websites from which they can download particular information (which must be stored in electronic or paper forms). Textual animations, graphics and audio- and/or videostreams of varying languages, lengths and complexity can also be included. While all may be technically possible at the design source, only a fraction may be within the capacity of a country's landlines to deliver to learners' computers, and/or within the financial capacity of learners to pay for the hardware and software necessary to access such learning (whether that be computers or DVDs, CD players and the like).

Librarians can set up course resources online (for example, .pdf files of readings from journals, chapter extracts from books, previous students' assignments) which also require electronic- and/or paper-based storage for later comprehension and composition activities related to the course of study. Course and program administration software packages can direct learners to websites for their enrolment and management of their study programs, with the legal proviso that it is their responsibility to ensure that they are enrolled correctly, have met any prerequisite requirements for studying particular courses and have confirmed that their grades posted at the end of a term/semester are indeed consistent with the assessment results they have received from their lecturers. In these ways, the teachers' pedagogical work is transferred to and shared with support staff members and students.

Teachers can exploit the capacities of online learning management systems to provide both synchronous and asynchronous, individual and small group learning and assessment activities via the Internet's computer mediated communication capabilities. Yet it is rare indeed for a teacher operating in flexible e-learning environments not to have a story to tell about "the day the network/system crashed", or the student's assignment that was reported lost because her/his harddrive seized, froze or crashed. Such stories echo earlier laments of distance education students that "the materials never did arrive in the mail", or "I missed the teletutorial because I was working/the children were sick/they never contacted me", which culminates in "…but I posted the assignment on the due date".

For all these reasons, teachers take multiple pedagogical risks and broker the choices available to them according to the socioeconomic and cultural positionings of their students-as-learners and the technological facilities provided by their employing institutions (Harreveld, 2002). However, the differences in people's geographical, cultural and/or socioeconomic circumstances are used by institutions and systems to categorise them as being different, or 'other', as learners. In a Foucauldian sense (Hindess, 1996), each group of people is historically, socially and culturally constructed and maintained by power relations that operate within higher education systems. Scown (2004) questions how we can work with the realities of people's lifeworlds to construct meaningful professional development and continuing education and in the process warns of the riskiness of this pedagogical work if "our teachers, managers and leaders assume and encourage sameness and uniformity as they try to teach us ways to conform to the standards of our organisation, the culture of our workplace, the voice of our nation" (p. 50).

Pedagogical roles and responsibilities have changed irrevocably, owing in no small part to the previously identified lifeworld changes wrought in people's private personal selves and their professional working lives. Significantly, this pedagogical repositioning is constituted by an ongoing series of actions and interactions in which the actors reposition themselves and are repositioned by local and global flows of people, images, texts, ideas and so on. Windeknecht (2004) has identified the teacher's role as that of 'facilitator' or 'tutor' and students are no longer members of classes, but rather of 'e-groups'. This highlights both the challenges and the opportunities for multidisciplinary teams of designers and teachers to use information communication technologies to engage with the linguistic and cultural diversities of their student cohorts (Fleming & Cribb, 2004; Sutton, 2004; Walker-Gibbs, 2004; Windeknecht, 2004).

If we are committed to scaffolding responsive, inclusive learning environments in the formal, postcompulsory, educational sector, then, particularly for universities, policies should be revisited and new alliances forged as pedagogical work is already being shared via a professional community not bounded by workplace borders of an earlier industrial era and by previous categorisations of people as different types of learners. Many of the pedagogues have already redefined themselves, as have their students; and the challenge is now for the administrators and their institutionalised management systems to catch up. The resourcing of learning in many postcompulsory learning environments (of universities and colleges) is still tied to a politics of difference that exploits the multiliteracies of technology and linguistic and cultural diversity in ways that can actively work against cultural inclusivity at the sites of

enactment. When policy meets practice at this juncture within contexts of local and global change, it is timely for pedagogues to explicate their practices.

USING MULTILITERACIES FOR SITUATED LEARNING

Stewart-Dore (2003) has proposed a framework for developing multiliteracies to engage with the worlds of schools, workplaces and people's private lives. She has called this framework the Developing Multiliteracies Model and it has four phases: (i) accessing knowledge – engaging learning; (ii) interrogating meanings – comprehending critically; (iii) selecting and organising information – connecting understandings; and (iv) presenting knowledge functionally and critically – synthesising learning. Figure 1 Multiliteracies of Situated Learning represents our challenge in developing new understandings of the notion of 'distance education'.

Figure 1 Multiliteracies of Situated Learning
(adapted from Harreveld, 2003; with Lave & Wenger, 1991; Peters, 2000; Stewart-Dore, 2003)
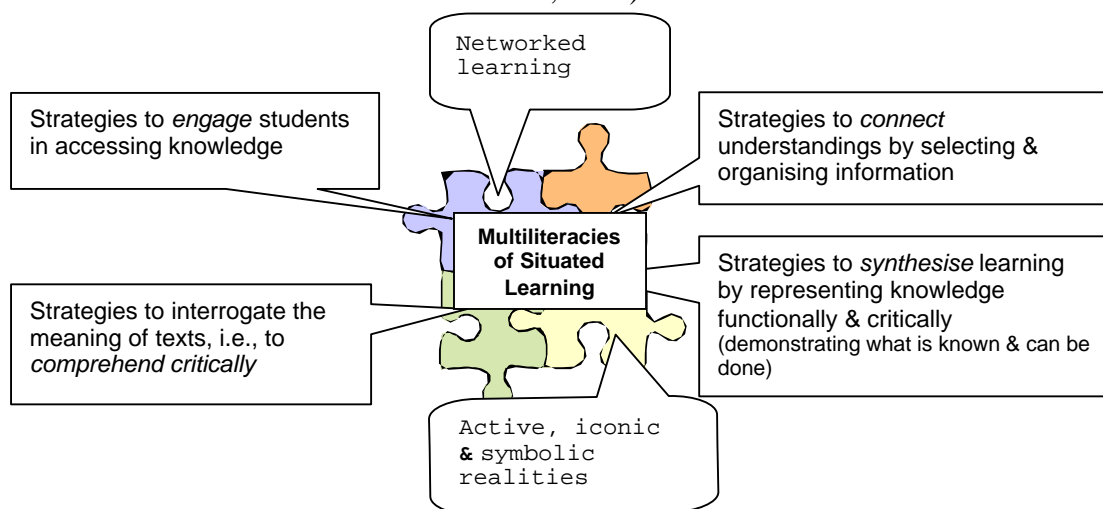
In theory, the thinking embodied in this figure is based upon a view of the world in which knowledge is both socially situated and culturally constructed. In practice, it owes much to the work of thinkers and researchers who are now affiliated with social cognition and social learning theories. Preeminent among such thinkers was Lev Vygotsky (1978), who argued that learning *per se* is not natural because it relies upon explicit, scaffolded interactions with other people who have more expertise in that specific area of historical, socioculturally constructed knowledge. He found that it was the cognitive challenges that people were presented with which stimulated learning to take place. Importantly, the social world and influences of various cultures could not be ignored in this process because culture is considered the prime determinant of individual development.

In this reasoning, capacities and practices of learning have been developed in cultural contexts and are affected to greater or lesser degrees by those cultures. There is a theoretical 'fit' or congruence with Lave and Wenger's (1991) ethnographically framed social theory of learning which reconceives learning, learners and educational institutions in terms of the social practices of communities – that is, 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1999). However, this serves only to highlight the enormous

challenges for us, as both teachers and learners, when operating in technologically mediated learning environments in which we may be to varying degrees distant from one another in space and/or time.

From the electronically simulated communities of practices in the 'toolboxes' of the vocational education and training sector (Sutton, 2004) to the community-formulated, real-world problems tackled by primary school students, their teachers and university teachers-in-training in a regional centre (Walker-Gibbs, 2004), each of the authors in this edition has grappled with these challenges. Windeknecht's (2004) abstract provides a synthesis of this pedagogical work which extends from Hong Kong (McNaught, 2004) and Malaysia (Pandian, 2004) to Melbourne (Scown, 2004) and centres in between (Fleming & Cribb, 2004):

> …harnessing multiliteracies within a learning environment can add value to the learning experience. In addition, it allows the notion of students studying via distance education being disadvantaged to be challenged. It encourages the move to focusing beyond mode of study back to the learning of individuals and to the encouragement of students to engage in a learning process utilising the diversity in the student cohort. (Windeknecht, 2004, p. 57)

CONCLUSION

Now that we are almost at the end of the journey of this paper, which in turn is the final stage of the expedition conducted by the preceding seven articles and the special theme issue of this journal that they constitute, it is timely to return to the two questions that have informed our travel: implicitly in the case of the preceding articles, explicitly in this paper. In doing so, we reiterate briefly the three ideas canvassed here and the two elements that multiliteracies and distance education have in common: cultural and linguistic diversities; and new communication technologies.

The first question asked: "How are multiliteracies relevant to contemporary debates about teaching and learning?". For us, the preceding articles engage with, critique and demonstrate that relevance in multiple ways that we contend will repay careful and ongoing attention. Also for us, the relevance of multiliteracies has been encapsulated in the three ideas elaborated in this paper. Firstly, multiliteracies highlight the closely interwoven and mutually dependent private and professional dimensions of teachers' and learners' lived experiences, of which formal education is only one part. A crucial challenge for teachers and learners alike, then, is to help to contest the othering – and hence the potential extinction – of minority cultures and languages whose exponents enact with particular poignancy the intersection of private and professional lives. One possible way among many to contribute to that contestation is to consider the Evidence – Critique – Impact pedagogical framework developed by Scown (2004).

Secondly, multiliteracies illustrate the continuing complexity of pedagogical work, including the contributions of sometimes unseen but nevertheless indispensable additional participants and stakeholders in that work. A striking example of this complexity and those contributions was Walker-Gibbs's (2004) account of the *Learning Initiatives* project, involving a school (including students and teachers), a university (including student teachers and their lecturers) and a community (including community members). This project, like its equivalents in many of the other articles in this issue, manifested the interplay between various kinds of diversity and multiple

forms of technologies and the pedagogical work needed to bring that interplay alive for learners.

Thirdly, multiliteracies contribute to the enduringly relevant point that teaching and learning are – perhaps above all else – sociocultural practices situated in particular instances of space and time. Likewise Sutton (2004) reported the links between situated learning and 'authentic activities' (see also Fleming & Cribb, 2004; Windeknecht, 2004), and demonstrated how the multiliteracies framework lies at the intersection of both those practices, in the process enriching and sustaining each of them.

The second question asked: "What are the implications of multiliteracies for new understandings of distance education in the Asia Pacific region in the early 21st century?". We have asserted throughout this paper the need for such understandings to be envisaged. This is partly due to the continuing metamorphosis of the practices variously associated with such terms as 'correspondence education', 'distance education', 'flexible learning', 'open learning' and 'online learning'. Daniel (1998) elaborated the synergistic links between new communication technologies and changing pedagogical practices in the higher education sector. With the blurring of enrolment modes and delivery models comes increased opportunities for what has been previously understood as 'distance education', yet this blurring also necessitates a refocusing on what distance education is and for whom it exists. We contend that that refocusing is considerably enhanced by a consideration of the multiliteracies framework.

Again we shall restrict our commentary to three key points. Firstly, following the three ideas elaborated in the main part of this paper, distance education must be understood as encompassing and as potentially empowering participants' private and professional lives, the pedagogical work underpinning distance education and the situated learning needed to render that work 'authentic' and relevant. Secondly, like any educational system, distance education is neither natural nor neutral: it must take up its fair share of the responsibility to ensure that education maps, values and extends the cultural and linguistic diversities making up the Asia Pacific region – and also existing globally – in the early 21st century, and multiliteracies provide one set of strategies for doing so. Thirdly, distance education has a responsibility as well for deploying the new communication technologies in ways that expand information and knowledge rather than maximising the regional and global 'digital divide' – and again multiliteracies present opportunities for doing that.

Overall, then, we argue that this special theme issue of the *Malaysian Journal of Distance Education* has provided seven diverse and important contributions to two sets of learnings. One set has been in relation to the concept of multiliteracies: we believe that that concept has been augmented and enriched by its deployment across a range of empirical settings and theoretical concerns. The other set has been with regard to the understandings of distance education: we think that the judicious application of the multiliteracies framework has helped to elaborate an expanded comprehension and appreciation of the potential of distance education, particularly in relation to the cultural and linguistic diversities and the new communication technologies that it 'shares' with multiliteracies. This part of the journey, aided by these navigational tools, is over – the agenda to render distance education as relevant,

meaningful and possible goes on.

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R. E. Harreveld is Research Fellow in the Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development Centre in the Division of Teaching and Learning Services at the Rockhampton Campus of Central Queensland University, Australia.

Patrick Alan Danaher is Associate Professor and Head of the Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development Centre in the Division of Teaching and Learning Services at the Rockhampton Campus of Central Queensland University, Australia.